

The Genius Issue

How does a three-year-old get assessed for giftedness?
*Stacey Anyan asks how many children are truly gifted
and what's being done to foster their talents.*

I bumped into a good friend recently and asked what she'd been up to. Turned out she'd just taken her three-year-old to be assessed for giftedness and, as a result, he'd be joining a playgroup run nationwide for gifted preschoolers: Small Poppies.

You're joking, I said. Actually, I didn't say that. I value the friendship. But I was left scratching my head. I knew her son had a great imagination, and understood the concept of halves and quarters, but... gifted?

When I next babysat him, I was tempted to perform my own ad hoc "assessment". Could he construct a replica Eiffel Tower out of Meccano? Create a concerto on the xylophone? Stop that bloody "Install Java now" message from repeatedly popping up on my computer screen?

It's a running joke in my coffee group: if one of our babies is the first to achieve a milestone, we all laugh, "Must be gifted!"

I recalled my recent stint as a Brownie leader in a well-heeled, inner-city suburb. It seemed most of the 20-odd Brownies in my pack attended a "gifted and talented"

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Precocious geniuses: Mozart (top) and Picasso (above).

class at their local primary school (and some seemed rather fond of letting me know). While there were plenty of bright sparks in my school classes in the 80s and 90s, I don't remember any stand-out students, let alone enough to necessitate a separate class.

My friend wasn't the type of parent who succumbs to the lure of "Your Baby Can Read" DVDs or the battle hymns of "tiger mothers" exhorting all work, no play. My curiosity was piqued. How does a three-year-old get assessed for giftedness? And why did he need to attend a special play group at \$35 a pop?

Most of us are familiar with the precocious genius of Mozart, who composed symphonies at age five. Or Picasso, considered a

mature artist producing significant works when he was in his teens. Less familiar but no less astounding is the youthful giftedness manifest in Kim Ung-Yong, a Korean born in 1962 who had mastered four languages by his second birthday, became a university physics student at age four, and at age eight, was invited to the United States by NASA to study.

Or how about Oprah's Gen-Y guest star Akrit Jaswal – India's youngest-ever university student and physician, who, at age seven, successfully performed surgery on a girl whose burned fingers were fused into a fist. He's now busy finding a cure for cancer.

Society marvels at the astonishing feats of wunderkinds. But some would roll their eyes on hearing a child describe how old they are as "four and seven-twelfths". Witness the response from a school teacher who'd been asked by a parent if their five-year-old could skip the "reading readiness" programme because he'd been reading since age two: "It's my duty to pluck the tall poppies."

Or how about the parent who vented anonymously on an online forum about arriving to pick up their child, M, from an after-school activity to hear "two grown women, mothers no less, who know M is gifted, having a very loud discussion in front of my child about how gifted people are 'mental'".

Rosemary Cathcart, who was awarded the QSM for her efforts in championing the needs of gifted children, laments the stigma. "There's a common perception that their parents will be pushy, affluent and the kids will do well at school. I've had teachers say gifted children don't deserve help, because they've got it made in life."

Lobbying on behalf of her own gifted children eventually led to lobbying government for changes to teacher training and classroom teaching for gifted children. In the mid-90s, she established the Gifted Education Centre, which runs one-day classes for primary-school students. She now runs a consultancy on gifted education. Her career was propelled by encountering "desperately unhappy" children, like a five-year-old who, although reading Roald Dahl independently at home, was forced to learn as a beginner reader at school and subsequently began bedwetting and having nightmares; a boy misdiagnosed as having ADHD and unnecessarily being dosed with Ritalin; a seven-year-old who nearly succeeded in committing suicide because of his anguish at school.

While no conclusive evidence points to gifted children being at any greater or lesser risk than their non-gifted peers of suffering

anxiety and depression, their abilities still pose particular problems, such as their being bored and under-stimulated, being lumbered with high expectations, or feeling different from their peers.

Cathcart says some researchers believe more than half of gifted children are never assessed as such, nor receive appropriate help. "If these statistics were applied to children with hearing problems, we would surely be expressing considerable professional concern."

Diagnosis is fraught because even the experts can't agree on what giftedness is. "One of our greatest weaknesses is our definition. It makes it harder to convince the sceptics," says Sue Breen, director of Small Poppies. For most of the 20th century, giftedness was simply hemmed to having a high IQ. Mensa, the society for the super-smart, sets its membership criteria at 130 or above, which is the general benchmark for academic giftedness.

However, since the 80s some have argued that concentrating on academic prowess alone fails to recognise important abilities in fields such as music, sport and art – and even cultural, interpersonal and social abilities. "Charisma may be your area of giftedness – look at political leaders like Hitler and Martin Luther King," says Cathcart.

Maori concepts of giftedness include "those who are really good at manaakitanga – helping others, caring for people and the environment, such as Dame Whina Cooper", says Massey University Associate Professor Jill Bevan-Brown.

Giftedness is now commonly defined as those who are achieving or possess the ability to achieve at the top five per cent in any given area. Note "possess the ability" – being gifted doesn't guarantee academic success. And note "in any given area". You can be gifted in anything. But being gifted doesn't mean you'll be wildly brilliant at everything you turn your hand to.

And being a gifted child doesn't guarantee you'll be a stonkingly successful adult. In 2010 a British longitudinal study of 210 gifted children claimed only six "achieved their potential" by their mid-30s – while the rest "cut loose" of the expectations placed upon them.

Even more perplexing, you can be gifted in one area and have a learning disability in another, such as dyslexia, ADHD or apraxia. This is known as "twice-exceptional" – 2E for short – and it's a bugger to diagnose as the disability tends to mask the ability. While a diagnosis in that instance is usually confirmed by an educa-



Rosemary Cathcart was awarded the QSM for her efforts in championing the needs of gifted children.

tional psychologist, Cathcart maintains that to determine conventional giftedness, you don't need "expensive tests". "There's a lot we can tell from a child's behaviour – their responses, how they learn."

Waikato University dean of education Professor Roger Moltzen echoes the sentiment. "If you got a group of teachers together and asked them their definition of giftedness, they'd be stumped. But if you asked them to name five children they've taught who they think are gifted, they wouldn't struggle at all."

Being labelled as gifted carries not just

stigma, but expectation, he adds. "That pressure isn't always helpful. And very few children really are strong in all areas as to qualify for a general label."

The difficulty in labelling kids as gifted, argues Auckland University faculty of education senior lecturer Lynda Garrett, is that it highlights the difference: they might dumb themselves down, withdraw and underperform. "Yet if you don't highlight the difference, how can you get the right help and respond to the child?"

To get around the loaded label, New Zealand academics once proposed alternatives,

such as children with "special" or "exceptional" abilities. But our government picked up on the phrase "gifted and talented", coined by Canadian researcher François Gagné, who makes a distinction between genetically endowed potential (giftedness) and environmentally nurtured performance or ability (talents).

A few things about giftedness are certain. Gifted children are not a homogeneous group. The pushiest of parents can't produce a gifted child – it's inherent from birth. And being gifted is very different from being bright. A bright child knows the answers. Solves the problems. A gifted child asks the question. Finds the problems.

Small Poppies' Sue Breen says you only have to show a gifted child a new concept once or twice for them to get it. They have long concentration spans, are more inclined to speculate about possibilities and can reason abstractly at an early age. They can quickly make connections between concepts, like the four-year-old who, says Breen, when being shown the mechanisms of hydraulics for the first time related it to the way spiders' legs work (they'd been studying spiders the previous week).

They usually have an extensive vocabulary, an exceptional memory and teach themselves to read. They often have a quirky sense of humour, usually involving word puns. (A parent says when she tripped and had a soft landing near some trees, her three-year-old giggled, "Mum, did you go on a bush walk?")

They may have a strong sense of justice, and feel things with a strong emotional intensity – like the four-year-old who Cathcart recalls had to be taken home from kindy because he'd gone "berserk".

"He'd learned about the hole in the ozone and his intention was to explain to his kindy peers in the sandpit that the hole was caused by pollution so everyone had a responsibility to do something about it. He couldn't understand why the other kids didn't care as well. He was frightened, convinced we'd all die."

So much for pushy parents: research indicates 85 per cent of parents who suspect their child is gifted are correct (interestingly, the rate is only 55 per cent for teachers). In fact, Breen says most of her clients have been alerted to their child's milestones by other parents. "In New Zealand we tend to be very wary of putting ourselves out there – the sorts of phone calls I get are 'I'm



The theme on this day at Small Poppies playgroup was money and teaching the children to recognise relative values. Here lead teacher Sue Breen explains how to play money bingo to (from left) Madeleine Park, three, Angus Sparks, four, Joe Gregory, four, Isikeli Brown, three, and Ella Winstone, two.

SCHOOLS FOR SMARTIES

Small Poppies runs playgroups in Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington, attended by a total of 50 preschoolers this term. The Nelson chapter is currently on hold, awaiting new members.

Around 300 students are currently enrolled in One Day School classes at 30 venues nationwide run by the Gifted Education Centre (formerly the George Parkyn Centre). Director Kathy Williams says numbers fluctuate term by term. Students come from schools of a wide range of deciles, the majority being four to eight. The centre also runs an online programme for children unable to access One Day School, with 48 currently enrolled (www.giftededucation.org.nz).

probably wasting your time, but..."

Many psychologists won't formally assess preschoolers, says Breen, who conducts informal assessments on potential Poppies herself. "You have to assess them in a caring environment because they might be shy. We'll do a few activities so I can see how they work through problems. I'll ask them to sort toy animals by shape, colour, number of legs they have, estimate how many will fit on a ruler. I'll hold up an elephant and ask them

"We're always looking for sponsorship for resources. But it's tricky as these children are perceived as being advantaged."

Small Poppies grew from parental requests for a gifted preschool playgroup. Do kids as young as two really need to be segregated from their non-gifted peers? Yes, says Breen. "They really need to get together with like minds. They still attend other preschool activities."

Small Poppies doesn't hothouse, Breen adds. "We're interested in having them as well-rounded members of society."

The modern definition of giftedness may be all-encompassing, but today's budding Mozarts and Picassos still risk falling through the cracks of our education system – especially if they're poor, brown or female.

A 2001 study by the Dunedin College of Education found children of doctors, lawyers and teachers were more likely to be called gifted, while Maori and Polynesian children were identified at half the rate of Pakeha, Asian and other ethnic groups.

Boys are also more commonly identified – because they're more likely to act up when bored in the classroom. Breen's own daughter (now an adult) employed a tactic common to gifted girls: deliberately keeping her marks to around 80 per cent so the teacher would be happy but she wouldn't stick out too much.

Lynda Garrett queries the selection process for gifted and talented classes: "I've heard some don't allow those with behavioural issues in." Yet disruptive behaviour may be caused by the very challenges those gifted and talented classes are designed to address.

More teacher training in giftedness is imperative, say academics. (Cathcart: "You're lucky to get a three-hour block in university teacher-training courses.") But while the government's coffers direct tens of millions to children at the lower end of the ability spectrum, gifted children are allocated just over a million – about half what it used to be, as a result of recent belt-tightening.

The cuts were made despite a 2008 Education Review Office report which found only 17 per cent of schools had good provisions for gifted children across five key evaluative areas. Auckland University faculty of education research fellow Janna Wardman is staggered that didn't prompt an outcry.

There are "wonderful things" happening for gifted children in our schools, she says, "but they tend to be random and ad hoc. It's

to 'find me a kangaroo like this one' because it's important they're confident and don't take everything an adult says to be true – and have good manners while doing it."

There's a checklist for parents – about 30 globally agreed characteristics of gifted children, such as sleeping less than average, being a good leader and achieving milestones early. "Not every child will have all these [characteristics] but the more ticks they have, the more chance they'll be gifted."

About a dozen kids attend the science-based sessions with their parent or guardian. There's usually a theme (the day *North & South* visits the pupils are giving presentations of their own research into an animal of their choice).

Time is spent predicting, estimating and following the kids' interests, says Breen. They even do relatively mundane activities such as cutting and pasting (research shows achievement of gifted kids is linked to fine motor skills – especially in boys).

At \$35 a session, the fees are considerably more than your average gold-coin donation community playgroup. But it barely covers costs, says Breen, who operates Small Poppies in a leaky building at a low-decile school in central Auckland. (Parent organisation the Gifted Education Centre also rents the same building.) Parents help track down cheap resources on Trade Me.

nothing to do with whether you go to a public or private school. It's down to individual teachers. A school might have a teacher enthusiastic about gifted education who runs a great programme which lapses when they move to another school."

Schools vary in their effectiveness partly because of disagreement over definition, she says, citing how the British government defined giftedness as the top 10 per cent simply to get strategies off the ground.

Wardman wonders how many gifted children there might be in the thousands of young Kiwis leaving school each year with little or no formal qualifications. But her biggest beef is that being bumped up a year isn't used more as a strategy for teaching the gifted – especially when it rates fifth in a list of 106 factors in improving individual achievement, as researched by her mentor, educational researcher Professor John Hattie.

"Not a single piece of evidence-based research shows that acceleration causes harm. When children study at their own pace, they benefit socially, emotionally and academically."

She says students usually get to study above their year level in only one or two subjects, so they have to stay at school and do Year 13 just to get enough credits to enter university. "This suits a lot of schools – they get a double whammy of good marks. I've had a principal tell me it was 'not in our best interests' to accelerate a gifted child. But what about the child's best interests?"

Roger Moltzen suggests that in the school setting – "which rewards convergent rather than divergent thinking" – the focus should be on identifying and catering for gifted behaviours rather than gifted children per se. "We need people to run the world but we also need to look at people who can change the world – the view they've got is valuable. There is a tendency for schools to value well-roundedness but our outstanding achievers are not necessarily well-rounded."

Supporters of the gifted say ignoring their special educational needs amounts to squandering a precious economic resource.

Melissa-Clark Reynolds, a successful entrepreneur who was once New Zealand's youngest woman to attend university and who has recently resorted to home schooling her 11-year-old gifted daughter, says in our country sports are idolised and academia is marginalised, "which isn't healthy".

"We take the kids who are gifted in sport, coach them, give them national training

camp, tweak their performance and reward and celebrate their success... imagine if we did that for our top scholars? New Zealand is still a place where different-ness isn't well tolerated... I am not defined by the way my mind works – it is one aspect of who I am."

Indeed, the theme for the world conference on giftedness next year – Cathcart managed to secure the hosting rights for New Zealand – is "The Soul of Giftedness".

New Zealand really ought to be a culture that nurtures giftedness, she says, "because you're talking about the ultimate manifestation of the number 8 wire mentality – the ability to see a problem and find an innovative solution".



Ella Winstone, two, with mum Ammie Currie, plays a money bingo game at Small Poppies playgroup.

Small Poppies' Sue Breen says gifted children have long concentration spans and can reason abstractly at an early age.



Kim Downie with daughter Kaia, four, at Small Poppies.

Parents' Perspectives

The good, the bad and the ugly side of having giftedness in the family.

When Jane's eldest daughter was two and a half, she picked a patch of red paint off the wall in her bedroom to uncover the white paint beneath and said, "Look mummy, I've made Russia."

"She'd done a pretty good job of it – I had to look at a map myself to confirm it." It was one of many signs her daughter, now seven, was different. Another was her increasing propensity for violent behaviour. "Screaming, hitting, tantrums – just for being given a type of bread she didn't like for breakfast. She kicks, slams doors, attempts to smash windows, rip curtains. Usually it starts with a simple request to put on her shoes."

She also started refusing to do tasks at school she considered "boring".

Jane says she avoided finding out about giftedness "for fear of being wrong and looking like an idiot, or seeming overly keen on my child being 'special'." But following advice from others on the NZ Association for Gifted Children online parenting forum she had her assessed for a gifted kids programme.

"It adds something for her to look forward to in the week. She's also in a maths extension class and feels a little intimidated by being put with kids slightly older than her, but at least it feels like the school is trying."

Meanwhile, home "still feels like a war zone". "My other two kids mimic her bad behaviour. I love all

our kids deeply, I just need help to know what to do next, because things can't keep going on like this."

Jane's experience may sound extreme, but it's not uncommon. Online forums teem with parents dealing with such asynchronous behaviour: talent streets ahead of their same-age peers allied to emotional immaturity which can manifest itself in uncontrollable tantrums.

While parents can vent and support each other anonymously online, fear of being judged by school staff and other parents means giftedness generally stays underground – and the myths persist.

Small Poppies' Sue Breen: "Parents say they're taking their kids to 'a playgroup' – not Small Poppies. It's really hard when you're trying to spread the word."

The stigma is such that two sisters hadn't realised their children attended different Small Poppies sessions until it was pointed out to them by administrators.

Another says, "When I was pregnant it was thought my son had spina bifida, so I researched and prepared myself for

what needs he might have and everyone supported me doing that. Turns out he doesn't have spina bifida but still has a very different development from his same age peers, yet because it's the 'g' word, I get frowned upon for trying to research and prepare to meet this set of needs.

"Some people say, 'They should be allowed to be children.' But being gifted is part of who they are. I don't always feel I can celebrate what my child does." At Small Poppies, parents enjoy being able to share their parenting experiences without being judged. "I tend not to discuss [my son's giftedness] with friends in case they think I'm better than them," one says. "Here I can talk about how the kids are up at 5am... that I'm exhausted... and discuss what's an appropriate chapter book series for a four-year-old."

Another spoke of the huge relief in "realising other parents were dealing with the same thing – stropiness, tantrums from not being able to do what they want, managing techniques".

"Neither of my kids are great sleepers," says one. "A lot of things suffer as a result – my house is a tip." The word "intensity" often crops up.

"It's like he has ADHD or a lot of coffee.

"You get kids who are interesting, good companions, with an excellent sense of humour."

Rosemary Cathcart

I think people think you're trying to get the kids ahead. But it's more him driving me."

One of the Small Poppies parents now teaches the class. She ended up studying giftedness in order to better advocate for her six-year-old's schooling. At four, her son "spoke like an adult and was a very conceptual thinker". But his emotional intensity wreaked havoc upon family life. She stumbled upon giftedness when researching socio-emotional issues; it had her in tears.

"For the first time I realised I was in the right place. They were talking about stuff I'd experienced but couldn't talk to my friends or family about."

She says the private school he attends didn't take her seriously when she requested more challenging material.

"They said, 'Don't worry, after a couple of years the other kids will catch up.'"

She says she sometimes feels like a "fraud". "Who am I to say my child is gifted? I'd grown up in a family where the attitude was, 'Oh, every parent thinks their child is gifted.'"

I've lost a few friends over it too. It was quite a tumultuous time; you question your own parenting. Now I'm better at dealing with it, and more accustomed to using the word 'gifted'."

Parenting a gifted child isn't all doom and gloom, of course.

"You get kids who are interesting, good companions, with an excellent sense of humour," says Rosemary Cathcart. "They tend to be sensitive to your moods, and can be very caring."

Others mention how much they enjoy learning new things alongside their children. And the kids aren't all destined to suffer the socio-emotional woes associated with being gifted. "We joke about our four-year-old being too normal to be gifted – he still jokes about poos and bums. Let's face it, he is special, he's awesome, but for so many reasons other than his advanced academic skills."

Gifted Awareness Week, June 18-24.

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